Seasonal flu: The annual grim reaper

Editor's note: This is the first in a three-part series on the seasonal flu. This article deals with the significance of the seasonal flu.

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Soon, the influenza season will be upon us and if you're like most Americans, a slight disinterest comes with it.

But, regardless of the annual reoccurrence of it, people need to take notice and practice preventive measures. If not, you could get the flu as up to 20 percent of the U.S. population gets sick from it each year.

For some 30,000 to 35,000 people living in the United States, that means suffering from complications that result in death, said Maj. Troy Ross, chief of Preventive Medicine at Fort Hood's Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center.

"Most die from other problems associated with the flu," Ross said, pointing out that the majority of deaths occur in those aged 65 or higher. The other groups at high risk are the very young and people with immune system problems, he added.

Numbers like that can't be taken lightly when compared to other high visibility forms of death in the nation. For example, there were nearly 31,000 suicide deaths and 20,308 from homicide in 2001, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Likewise, in 2000, 43,000 died in motor vehicle crashes, 29,000 in incidents involving firearms, and 37,000 died when you total illicit drugs with sexual behaviors, states the Journal of American Medical Association in a 2004 publication.

Educating the public yearly is very important, said Ross, to keep people from getting complacent.

"People typically don't pay much attention to it," he said, explaining that the public often doesn't know the difference between the flu from other winter-time illnesses. "A lot of times, people don't know the difference between the common cold and the flu. And for most healthy people they never will unless they go in and get diagnosed."

Even medical experts often can't know with any real certainty until laboratory tests come back.

The symptoms overlap, he said, citing headache, stiff neck, sore muscles, fever, coughing and a running nose as possible flu-like symptoms. Nausea and vomiting usually aren't associated with the flu, he said, but it is possible in children, although infrequent.

Primary symptoms usually last five to seven days. "The cough and just feeling rundown can go on for a couple of weeks," Ross said.

So, what is the best tool medical personnel have in preventing the season flu?

Getting vaccinated, Ross said.

While the CDC goal is getting 90 percent of the older, and higher risk populations -- all children under 5 years old, pregnant women, and people with immune system problems -- vaccinated, in reality, it's usually around 65 percent, Ross said.

“As people get older their immune systems aren’t as effective,” Ross explained. Hence, those 65 and older have a higher rate of complications from the flu.

Regarding myths that people use to rationalize on why they shouldn’t get a vaccination, the biggest is that the flu shot makes people sick.

“People can’t get sick from the injection,” Ross assured.

People think they can because other factors come into play on why people are getting sick during the flu-shot season. For example, children are now closer together in larger groups with the start of school, and, since it’s colder, people are indoors more frequently and thus are exposed to other people’s illnesses, he said.

Another myth that needs debunking, Ross said, is the idea that people build up an immunity to vaccinations. Again, simply not true, he said since the flu changes each year and a new vaccine is developed to counteract it, he pointed out.

Yes, some people do experience a soreness in the area where they received their shot, but that’s all it is and will go away in a couple days, Ross said.